

CHRISTIANS IN A WORLD OF GENOCIDE



Franklin Littell

Historians, both Jews and gentiles, are generally agreed that the Holocaust is the most traumatic event in the experience of the Jewish people since the destruction of the Second Temple. No consensus yet exists, however, as to the meaning of the Holocaust for Christian history.

A number of Christian theologians now maintain that the Holocaust was a "watershed event" also in the history of Christianity, perhaps the definitive event in the history of European Christendom. The demand for a radical change in Christian preaching and teaching appears in a growing volume of lectures, essays and books.

The context of this demand must be held firmly in mind, for modern demands that Christian doctrine and utterance be changed come from several directions. Item: since the Enlightenment, Christian dogmas and teachings - the "intellectual discipline" of the Christian movement - have come under heavy "scientific" attack. Many well-meaning people think "divisive" teachings and "sectarian" moral positions should be relaxed for the sake of the general society. Item: with the rise in awareness of other world religions, some visionaries have affirmed a hidden unity of "the religious spirit" beneath all "outward differences", some intellectuals have come forward with plans to blend "the great religious truth systems" into one harmonious whole.

The argument of this essay takes another tack, namely that an imperative case for radical change in Christian preaching and teaching issues directly from an historical event: the murder of circa six million Jews, primarily during the years 1939-1945, by baptised Christians in the heart of Christendom. It is this historical event, in its precise context of verifiable facts, which puts the credibility of contemporary Christianity to the question.

The earthiness of this context removes the Holocaust from mystification: the crime was not committed under unknown circumstances by unknown perpetrators surrounded by bodies of unknown spectators. We know the names.

The precise context defines the uniqueness of the Holocaust. The facts that created and still surround it give the event the universal meaning. Two issues of primary significance for Christians emerge from the event in its unique and universal aspects. The first is purging the body of Christian preaching and teaching, liturgies and worldviews of antisemitism. The second is relating the Nazi



“...Between the forces of terror and the forces of dialogue, a great unequal battle has begun. I have nothing but reasonable illusions as to the outcome of that battle. But I believe it must be fought, and I know that certain men at least have resolved to do so. I merely fear that they will occasionally feel somewhat alone, that they are in fact alone. . .What I know - which sometimes creates a deep longing in me – is that if Christians made up their minds to it, millions of voices – millions, I say–throughout the world would be added to the appeal of a handful of isolated individuals who, without any sort of affliction, today intercede almost everywhere and ceaselessly for children and for men.”

Albert Camus, 1948, in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* 1961

genocide of the Jews to other genocides of modernity, giving energy to the identification and punishment of the crime.

Antisemitism in Christendom

Although the word itself was invented by Wilhelm Marr in Hamburg, Germany in the late 19th century, antisemitismus (correctly translated "antisemitism"), has corrupted Christianity since the family quarrel split the followers of Jesus from those who followed the founding teachers of rabbinical Judaism. As in most family alienations, the arguments to justify the division were far more bitter than any used in ordinary quarrels. The arguments against the Christians from the side of the rabbinical schools were just as sweeping as the Christian apologetics against Judaism, but they are not the appropriate subject for a post Auschwitz Christian writer. His role is to help clean up the Christian act.

Antisemitism in Christendom may be discerned at three levels - theological, cultural and political - marking three periods of alienation between Christians and Jews. As Christian antisemitism went along, through the centuries it appropriated and assimilated convergent anti-Jewish prejudices.

At its first level, controversial apologetics prevailed. The argument was that the Christians inherited the promise: those who stayed with rabbinical Judaism - which took form after the destruction of the Second Temple - missed the turn in the road.

The message of dismissal was well rounded: with the coming of the Messiah, the Christ, the Hebraic gift to mankind was accomplished. Now "the new Israel," gathered in the Christian churches, carried history. God was through with the Jews. When the puzzle of their survival became pressing, a great Christian theologian, St. Augustine, explained that God allowed them to survive as a negative lesson, to model the fate of a reprobate people.

The initial quarrels were unpleasant, but not fatal. They became dangerous when two things happened. First, the Christian missionaries to the gentiles were astonishingly successful: within a few decades what began as a Jewish sect among many others swelled to a membership consisting overwhelmingly of non-Jewish converts throughout the Mediterranean basin. Second, with the conversion of Constantine the Great (Roman Emperor 306-37), Christianity became the privileged, legally established, and persecuting religion.

During the Middle Ages, Christian antisemitism assumed its cultural shape. Depending upon the level of literacy of the tribes converted, and also on the intellectual training of their clergy, "the Jew" was the satanic adversary of Christian mythology. He was the preachers' foil in sermons, and the rulers' excuse for failure in politics. Paintings were seen by few, but with the invention of printing, the defamatory pictures of "the Jew" were widely disseminated.

During the ages of theological and cultural antisemitism, the Christian teachers managed to keep

the connection of the "New Testament" to the "Old Testament," although there were gentile churches lasting into the 7th century that rejected the Old Testament. The canon of Christian scripture was fixed in the 4th century, with 80% of the Christian Bible consisting of Hebrew scriptures. Nevertheless, until the rise of modern Biblical studies, Christian realities were read back into the "Old Testament", and until the Holocaust there were scholars of eminence in great theological faculties who denigrated the significance of the Old Testament. Where the Old Testament was treasured in the churches, its connection with "the Jews" was not part of the story.

In the modern period antisemitism was transformed into a weapon of ambitious politicians, and finally into a genocidal program. In a society with the level of literacy of France or Germany or Holland, it assimilated to itself some of the ideas of social Darwinism, völkisch nationalism, economic determinism. As a finished ideology, genocidal antisemitism was comprised of a number of energies not attributable to Christianity alone.

Nevertheless, no professing Christian can avoid the substantial Christian input in the Holocaust - both in laying part of the theoretical groundwork and in providing the personnel that committed the crime - baptised Christians, never rebuked let alone excommunicated by the church officials. The Annual scholars' Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches, for example, has done important pioneering work in confronting the churches with this harsh truth. Without such spiritual surgery there can be no reconciliation between the Jewish people and the Christians, and a ring of truth in the preaching and teaching of the churches.

Dealing with Genocide

Although mass murders by rulers - like duelling feuding polygamy, infanticide, etc. - were widespread in past centuries, the realisation that genocide is a crime came out of the Holocaust. Even at the Nüremberg trials, "genocide" was not yet a concept in international law; those who committed the Holocaust were tried for "crimes against humanity" (a classical concept of Roman Law) and breach of "the rules of land warfare" (defined by Francis Lieber and issued by President Lincoln during the American Civil War, modified and entered into International Law by the Hague Convention, 1907.) The man who invented the word "genocide" and pushed the concept beyond public moral statements by statesmen of legal standing in the International Genocide Convention of 1957 was a refugee from Hitler's Europe: Raphael Lemkin (1901-59).

As with all advance in the government of human society by law, there are stages in awareness and effectiveness. First there are prophets who condemn the sin. There is an increase in public

"The highest principles for our aspirations and judgements are given to us in the Jewish-Christian religious tradition. It is a very high goal which, with our weak powers, we can reach only very inadequately, but which gives a sure foundation to our aspirations and valuations."

Albert Einstein



For Further Reading

Richard L Rubenstein, *The Cunning of History*, New York: Harper & Row, 1975

Lyman H. Legters, *Western society After the Holocaust*, Colorado: Westview Press, 1983

Steven T Katz, *The Holocaust in Historical Context*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994

uneasiness about continuation of the wrong practice. Next, the custom is recognised as a crime, no longer an unavoidable disaster like a flood or an earthquake. Next the crime and its penalties are defined at law. Finally, those who commit the crime are apprehended and punished.

Today in civilised societies crimes such as human sacrifice, gladiatorial combat, infanticide and chattel slavery are punished. With genocide, we are moving slowly along the path between the point when the crime is defined at law and the time when criminals are apprehended and punished. Nevertheless, for the first time in history a ruler has been identified as a genocide criminal; although not yet apprehended he cannot safely leave the small country he rules. And, again for the first time, there are several dozen persons in custody in The Hague and elsewhere, charged with the crime of genocide.

Maintaining the memory and memorialization of the Holocaust is imperative for Christians as well as Jews. There is also a religious obligation vigorously to move the public conscience to the point where genocide no longer goes unpunished anywhere in the world. This is also a fitting tribute too to those who perished in the Holocaust, victims in an age when national and racial violence was not yet checked in the law of nations.

In Conclusion

After Auschwitz, churchly condemnation of antisemitism is widespread, although the specific implications in such sectors as home missions, seminary education and church discipline have yet to be worked out.

Confronting the crime of genocide is still at a more elementary level. The Christian churches are frequently still captive to political powers, as the general record of the churches during Hitler's domination of Europe plainly documents. In now confronting the crime of genocide, the task of the churches is to create and cultivate a culture of resistance to nationalist and ethnic prejudice and a stance of conscientious objection to immoral - and now illegal - genocidal actions of government.

Whether in Europe - with its churches still too often servile before those in political power, or in the United States - where old-fashioned nationalists led the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee still strive to cripple American participation ineffective international action against genocide, the responsibility of post-Auschwitz Christians seems plain to read: to help build up a strong public consensus calling for inhibition of the crime of genocide, and to demand the efficient punishment of the criminals when and where they are identified.

This requires a willingness on the part of the churches' leaders to confront criminal governments and publicly to condemn criminal acts by legitimate governments. This may be the simple most important lesson to be mastered by post-Holocaust Christians.